



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Early History of Lent
(*Lent*, pp. 18-26)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

The Early History of Lent

The season of Lent appears after the Council of Nicea. With so many biblical precedents, why did it take the Church over three hundred years to seize upon the idea of fasting for forty days?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Meditation[†]

Observing Lent can help us enter the fullness of God. In the broadest sense, Lent re-enacts Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem and his turn toward the suffering that culminates at the cross.

Scott Waalkes

Reflection

Forty-day fasts are common and significant in Scripture—think of Moses fasting after he received the law (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9) and again when he saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 9:18), Elijah fleeing from Jezebel without food (1 Kings 19:7-8), the Ninevites repenting of their sins (Jonah 3:4), and Jesus fasting in the wilderness. So, it's not surprising the Church year includes a forty-day season of penitence and fasting. This helps explain why until recently scholars assumed that Lent—known as *Tessarakosti* in Greek and *Quadragesima* in Latin, for “the Forty”—had been established by the apostles or next generation of Christians as a time to prepare for Easter baptisms and was celebrated by everyone in the Church.

That assumption now appears to be much too simple. “While fasting before Easter seems to have been ancient and widespread, the length of that fast varied significantly from place to place and across generations,” Nicholas Russo explains. “Only following the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. did the length of Lent become fixed at forty days, and then only nominally.” So, how did Lent arise? Russo canvases three current theories.

- ▶ *The early history of Lent is impossible to reconstruct.* Several parts of the simple view above are doubtful. It appears Easter baptism was not widespread before the mid-fourth century, and other occasions for baptism were common; pre-baptismal fasts occurred throughout the year; and the forty-day Lenten fast arose independently of the pre-Easter fast. For these reasons, as Russo notes, some conclude “Lent is best understood as an entirely new phenomenon that emerges rather suddenly after Nicea and that any organic or genetic relationship it may have to pre-Nicene fasting practices cannot be proved.”
- ▶ *Lent grew from one Egyptian tradition of fasting for forty-days after the Feast of Theophany (i.e. Epiphany).* After honoring Jesus' baptism on January 6, this community imitated his forty-day fast in the wilderness. “After the Council of Nicea, the theory speculates, this fast would have been moved from its original position after Theophany and joined to Easter creating the Lent we know and with it bringing Egypt's baptismal practice in line with the rest of the Church.” But the evidence for this post-Theophany fast is rather slim, and the theory about why it was shifted to just before Easter is controversial (since it involves the possibly fraudulent “Secret Gospel of Mark”).



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

► *Lent emerged from various fasts that were common, especially in Egypt.* In addition to some evidence for the post-Theophany fast noted above, there are Egyptian church rules prescribing forty-day fasts to restore lapsed Christians, prepare catechumens who had certain “impure occupations,” and serve as penance for certain sins. The puzzle on this theory is why it took so long for the Church as a whole to commend fasting for forty-days! The answer may be that the Theophany feast itself was suspect because it started with an unorthodox group – the Basilidians, who taught that Jesus was *adopted* as God’s son at his baptism. Did this Egyptian group also begin the post-Theophany fast? “If...the custom was common among the heterodox,” Russo suggests, “it would go a long way to explaining why we hear nothing about it in the early period.” Perhaps the Council of Nicea established the “forty-day Lent prior to Easter...[to] stand in contradistinction as a touchstone of liturgical and theological allegiance.”

While the origins of Lent are shrouded in uncertainty, Russo believes its relation to “early baptismal and penitential practices whose common trait is *metanoia* – literally a changing of the mind and heart – suggest Lent can be ‘a tithe of the year’ (to use the patristic expression). We turn in prayer and fasting to be renewed in that forgiveness purchased on the Cross and that salvation vouchsafed in the Resurrection: these gifts received in baptism and renewed through repentance.”

Study Questions

1. What were the spiritual purposes of the fasts observed in Christian communities before the Council of Nicea? Which of these purposes inform the observation of Lent today?
2. Discuss how the forty-day fasts by Moses, Elijah, the Ninevites, and Jesus are relevant to our understanding of Lent.
3. In Claudia Hernaman’s hymn “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days,” how is Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness presented as a model for our discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” (vv. 1, 2 and 3)

Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us didst fast and pray,
teach us with you to mourn our sins
and close by you to stay.

As you with Satan did contend,
and did the victory win,
O give us strength in you to fight,
in you to conquer sin.

As you did hunger and did thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and so to live
by your most holy Word.

Claudia Frances Hernaman (1873)

Suggested Tunes: ST. FLAVIAN or MARTYRDOM

† Scott Waalkes, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 160

The Early History of Lent

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To canvas the possible origins of the Lenten season in the various fasting practices before the Council of Nicea in 325.
2. To review the forty-day fasts in Scripture.
3. To consider how the spiritual purposes of the scriptural and pre-Nicene church forty-day fasts should inform our understanding of Lent today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days" locate one of the tunes ST. FLAVIAN or MARTYRDOM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

During years of introducing evangelical Christians to the richness of Church tradition, Robert Webber (1933-2007) sometimes heard the complaint, "You're attaching too much significance to the Christian year. It is impossible for the discipline of the Christian year to accomplish so much for my spirituality." Webber took seriously the objectors' concern about empty formalism in religion, and he responded, "This objection has validity if the Christian year is seen as an end in itself. However, if we see the Christian year as an instrument through which we may be shaped by God's saving events in Christ, then it is not the Christian year that accomplishes our spiritual pilgrimage but Christ himself who is the very content and meaning of the Christian year." (Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004], 24)

This is an important point to keep in mind as we sift through historical research into the origins of Lent. In the various (possible) precursors to the season, how did early Christians experience Christ guiding their spiritual pilgrimage? How does Christ guide us through Lent today?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide members' spiritual pilgrimage through the Christian year, especially as they participate in Lent.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 4:1-13 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

By the early years of the fourth century we find references to *Tessarakoste* ("the Forty"), a season of fasting. Perhaps this was the earliest form of Lent. But if so, what were its precursors? Nicholas Russo outlines the

investigation that has led scholars to three possible scenarios. Like the other liturgical practices we know today, the season of Lent emerged as Christians reflected on Scripture and their discipleship. Encourage members to use this historical detective hunt to reflect on the meaning of their practice of Lent.

Study Questions

1. Nicholas Russo notes that many liturgical fasts expressed shared grief with Christ's suffering for the sins of the world. Thus, fasts in preparation for Easter were "ancient and widespread," ranging in length from forty hours (in remembrance of Jesus' time in the tomb) to six days. In places where Jesus' baptism was commemorated at the Feast of Theophany, or Epiphany, the forty-day post-Theophany fast may have been held in imitation of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness after his baptism.

Other fasts were commended to express remorse for one's own sins. Thus, fasts were assigned to baptismal candidates. For instance, the three-week fast practiced in Rome may have been a pre-baptismal fast on a free-floating schedule rather than a pre-Easter fast. Also Russo reports that in various places in Egypt forty-day fasts were assigned for "lapsed Christians to be readmitted from their term of excommunication," for the purification of baptismal candidates "who earn their living by 'impure occupations' — for example, by wrestling, running, acting, hairdressing, and so on," and "as penance for adulteresses and executioners who wish to be readmitted to the Eucharist."

Consider how the practice of fasting during Lent might express grief and identification with Christ's suffering, grief for the sins of the world, and remorse for one's own sin.

2. Moses fasted for forty days in response to the holiness of receiving God's law, and fasted a second time in grief for the people's faithless violation of it. The Ninevites fasted in remorse for their personal and corporate sins. Elijah's fasting seems to be a natural response to the burden of his ministry; he is keenly aware of his helplessness in the face of Jezebel's anger. Jesus does not fast for his own sin or in terror, but in the sober recognition of the world's sin and his difficult calling. Russo notes that the *Canons of Hippolytus* describes Jesus as "God who fasted on our behalf."

Thus, these scriptures involve fasting in remorse for personal and corporate sins, in grief for the sin and distress of others, and in sober recognition of God's call upon one's life. (We will learn more about the practice of fasting in the third study guide in this series, "Responsive Fasting.")

3. The first verse of Claudia Hernaman's "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days" says that Jesus teaches us to "mourn our sins" and not turn away from his difficult work of reconciliation ("and close by you to stay"). In the next verse, Jesus' successful struggle with Satan gives us hope of victory over temptation, not through our own wiles but in his strength. Finally in the third verse, Jesus gracious, self-giving attitude teaches us "to die to self, and so to live / by your most holy Word."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.